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# Solitary

*The three months in solitary had made Eddie a model prisoner. The warden didn't expect any trouble when he let Eddie go . . .*

**BY JACK RITCHIE**

JAKE shook my shoulder. "You want to spend these last couple of minutes saying goodbye? I'm the sentimental type."

I sat up and let my feet dangle over the edge of the bunk. "All right," I said. "Goodbye."

Jake's eyes studied me for a few seconds, his mouth edging toward a thin smile. "You strained yourself."

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He peeled back the paper of his chocolate bar for another bite. "What does it take to make you happy?"

I rested my elbows on my thighs and stared at my shoes.

"Jeez," he said, after a while. "I hope I get a live one in here next."

"Sure," I said. "Put in for somebody who keeps his yap moving."

"It don't have to be much, but at least something. All you ever done since we been together is stare at the ceiling."

"That's what I done," I said. "And I'm broken-up it made you so sad."

Jake waited for a piece of chocolate to dissolve in his mouth. "According to some of the boys, you made a lot of noise when you first come here."

"Just like you still do. But I bit too."

"Them three months in solitary done something, though, didn't they?" He licked sweetness from his fingers. "I thought they ain't allowed to keep you in that long."

"It slipped somebody's mind."

The first bell sounded and I got off the top bunk.

Jake put on his cap. "Here's my hand," he said. "If you got the urge, you can shake it."

I shook hands with him and then we waited at the cell door for the second bell.

When it rang and the locks sprung, we stepped out on the steel walk. I marched to the main floor

with the rest of the men and there one of the guards told me to fall out.

It was O'Leary who took me through the gates and out to the administration building.

"I like quiet guys like you," he said. "No fuss. No bother. You can come back any time."

"Thanks."

We went up the concrete steps. "Heard you were pretty tough once. But that was before my time." He glanced at me with guard laugh in his yellow-brown eyes. "We bend them or we break them. Nobody walks without a stoop for long."

I sat on a hard bench in the warden's anteroom with O'Leary beside me. There were no bars on these windows and the one o'clock sun made free patches of light on the floor. I stretched my legs into some of its warmth and let it seep through my trouser legs.

*We lay on the bank beside the pool and watched the high clouds for awhile and then we looked at each other. Her legs were slim brown and she rested her cheek on her arm as she faced me.*

*Her hair was golden with sun and had the softness of smoke. It responded to the faint flow of wind and I looked into the gray eyes that were waiting for me.*

O'Leary poked me with his club. "Wake up, Collier."

"My eyes are open."

"But you weren't seeing anything." He crossed his legs and shifted on the bench so that he could look at me. "Let me guess the first thing you're gonna do when you get out. Will you have to pay for it or have you got it waiting?"

When the warden was ready for me, I went in alone and sat down in front of his desk.

He picked up my file and scanned it briefly. Then he tamped the papers to a straight edge and began to talk with words that had lost their accent sharpness because they had been memorized.

I had paid my debt to society and I should not cherish bitterness. I could become a useful member of society if I worked hard. I must avoid bad company. I must not drink.

My eyes went to the calendar on the wall behind him. It was cheap and glossy, but it did show a green valley. A valley green and hidden in security.

*Her hand was soft in mine as we walked and I could smell the crispness of the ferns beside the stream. We stopped beneath a large oak to look at all the quietness that belonged to us and my arm went around her waist.*

The phone on the warden's desk was ringing and he picked it up. He listened with his head cocked and then spoke. "I'll take care of it in a

couple of minutes. Just as soon as I finish here."

He put down the phone and his mind lingered on other thoughts. Then he returned his attention to me. "Did I cover the point about getting permission before you leave the county of your residence?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

His eyes dulled for a look into his memory. "No, I didn't," he said. He inspected me coldly and then resumed talking.

When he finished, his thumb carelessly riffled the records. "Well, that's that. Just be a good boy and we won't see you again." He consulted his watch.

"You could have got off more time," he said. "But those first wild years didn't help you any." He smiled slightly. "Ninety days in the hole made you a different man, didn't they, Collier?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"It's the best way to handle the trouble makers. A few months alone with nothing but the dark. They can't stand that."

He enjoyed his reminiscent smile. "I'm hard, but I'm fair," he said. "Anybody who cooperates with me won't have a hard time. You learned that, didn't you, Collier?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

He laced his fingers in front of him. "Any questions?"

"No, sir," I said. And then I got up and went out to where O'Leary waited.

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opened the last gate for me. I stood outside on the walk in my new black shoes and looked down the line of cars in the parking lot.

Amy sat in a small sedan that needed repainting and she blew the horn when she saw me. She got out of the car and hurried toward me and she was out of breath when she put her plump arms around my neck.

My eyes examined her face and went to her brown eyes. "You wear glasses," I said.

"Why, Eddie," she said. "I been wearing them for three years now. You seen me in them lots of times on visiting days."

"That's right," I said. "Lots of times." I began walking toward the car and she caught up with me after a few steps.

"They're tinted a little bit because my eyes are sensitive to light. That's what the eye doctor told me. I got some astigmatism too."

I got into the car and she went around to the driver's side. I glanced at the shabby upholstery. "What have you been doing to keep alive?" I asked.

"Honestly, Eddie," she said. "You're so forgetful. I been waiting on tables for six years now at Grady's. You ask me every time you see me."

"That's right," I said. "And you tell me I'm forgetful."

She turned the car onto the highway and leaned forward in driver concentration.

I opened the window on my side and listened to the hum of the tires on the road.

"Did they give you a job, Eddie?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

She waited a while. "Well, what kind of a job is it?"

I thought about it and remembered. "In a warehouse. I'm supposed to put things in piles."

Amy drove at a conservative speed and several cars passed her. "I got a small cottage for us," she said. "Just three rooms. Nothing like we used to have. I made all the drapes myself. Chartreuse. I wasn't sure they'd go with the walls at first, but I took a chance and it turned out all right."

"Yes," I said.

"I bought a couple bottles of good whiskey," she said. "And some beer in cans. We'll just take off our shoes and wiggle our toes until the boys show up."

"All right," I said.

"I kept all your classical-type records," she said. "I don't have an automatic phonograph, though. You got to change the records yourself."

I closed my eyes against the light and listened to the whistle of air against the body of the car.

*I knew she was there and I smiled as I listened for her and at last opened my eyes. She leaned over me and there was the fragrance of perfume in her hair. She spoke softly to me and her hand*

*touched my face. Her lips came closer and rested lightly on mine.*

The car came to a stop and I opened my eyes. I wondered at the darkness.

"Did you have a nice nap, Eddie?" Amy asked. She turned off the motor and put the ignition keys in her pocketbook. "There it is," she said, pointing. "That little place in the back."

I got out of the car and walked to the front door. I waited until Amy came with the key.

Inside she kicked off her shoes and began turning on lamps. I sat down in an easy chair and listened to the flat sounds her feet made when she walked on the part of the floor that was bare.

She came back from the kitchen with a tray of canned beer, a bottle of whiskey, and glasses.

"I don't mind if my man drinks," she said. "Remember how you used to just sit with a bottle and listen to those records? You could really put away the stuff without showing it. You always drank like a gentleman."

I poured some of the whiskey into a glass.

Amy punched open a can of beer and swallowed a few times. "I was true to you, Eddie," she said. "You can ask any of the girls where I work and they'll tell you the same thing. I even turned down dates with Mr. Grady. And he respected me for

that. He said that if all women were as loyal to their men as I was this would be a better world."

I tasted the first liquor in ten years and it was nothing to me.

"Beer is healthier," Amy said. "But I miss the champagne. We'll fix that, though, won't we, Eddie?"

My eyes went to the stack of record albums on the table next to me and I picked up the Franck symphony.

The doorbell rang and Amy struggled to her feet. "Probably the boys," she said.

Benny Eckers and Mike Kurtz came into the room with their right hands searching for mine.

I remembered them again now, and that Benny was small with a flesh-starved face of lines and seams.

"Benny's a truck dispatcher for a gasoline company," Amy said. "Can you imagine?"

"It's a nervous job," Benny said. "All kinds of time limits and responsibilities. It's been ten months now and my parole officer is running out of gold stars."

Kurtz filled a water glass with whiskey and buried it in his big hand. "Life has been rough," he said. "A man my size sweats when he has to move around."

"We been looking places over," Benny said. "Mostly loan companies. Our idea is to hit about five or six in a week and then take off for someplace where we can spend it. We'll make up for all those years, Eddie."

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I watched the smoke of the cigarette I was trying.

"I'd like to see Florida again," Amy said. "All that excitement and all them people. We wouldn't have to be alone for a minute."

"Florida is out," Kurtz said. "Every second guy at the tracks is a dick."

"Kurtz is right," Benny said. "We spend our dough in Cuba or Mexico or some of them places where they don't care how you got it."

I stared at the amber glow in my glass of whiskey.

*Her voice was quiet music and it spoke only of things in which there was beauty. I listened to her words and marveled at the gentleness in them.*

Kurtz bumped his glass against the neck of the bottle as he refilled it.

"I like them big parties," he said. "All that fancy grub and them babes from the shows."

I took a record to the phonograph and put it on. "You like that, Kurtz?" I asked.

"That's what I said." Kurtz drank and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Big parties. That's really living."

"What was it like in solitary, Eddie?" Benny asked. "I was a meek con and never got a taste of it."

"What's to tell," Kurtz said. "I was in a week myself for heaving a

plate of stew across the dining hall. The last couple of days I would of give my right arm to hear somebody talk."

Benny's eyes went to the electric clock. "I'm getting on my horse," he said. "I gotta keep regular hours, being a working man and all. At least for another week or so."

"I got to shove off too," Kurtz said. "Think of it, Eddie. I'm a house painter."

When they were gone, Amy went to the bedroom. "I'll make myself more comfortable," she said.

She came back wearing a faded blue robe and sat down heavily in her chair. Her face was red and moist with the beer she had been drinking.

She scratched the calf of one leg. "Did you do much reading, Eddie?" she asked. "I remember you were all the time reading before you went to the pen."

"No," I said. "I don't have to read any more."

"That's good," she said. "Gee, sometimes you were a creep. Maybe now you'll learn how to enjoy life more."

I put another record on the phonograph.

Amy opened a fresh can of beer. "I guess one more won't hurt. But I don't want to overdo it tonight, if you know what I mean. You been gone a long time and I know what you want."

"Do you, Amy?"

"I know what boys want," she

said. She laughed and her body shook with it. "No hurry though," she said. "We got plenty of time. I'm off tomorrow."

When the record was finished, I put on the first movement of Smetana's *Moldau*.

"You're not going to listen to those damn records all night, are you?" Amy asked.

*There would have to be music in our valley. Not the music that intrudes and must be listened to with attention, but the music that is always background.*

Amy was standing up, her face splotched with anger. "I been talking to you for fifteen minutes and you just sit staring into space."

I looked at the record that had been played and was now revolving soundlessly.

Her eyes followed the direction of mine and then she moved. She grabbed the record off the machine and snapped it with her pudgy fingers.

She snatched one of the albums from the table and put it on the floor. The records cracked under her slipped heel.

She looked up as I rose and came to her. Her eyes showed fright before my hands went to her throat.

It wasn't at all difficult. My hands pressed mechanically until there was no more struggle in her.

I let her drop and looked down.

Her face was ugly purple and her eyes were flecked with blood.

I dragged her into the kitchen where she would be out of my sight, then I washed my hands carefully and returned to the living room.

There was now the question of running away and I considered it with a tired vagueness.

Then I heard the new music that shimmered faintly. It was beckoning and I had to get closer.

I put the album back on the table.

It made no difference now about what Amy had tried to do.

I turned out the lights and made my way to an easy chair.

I was going back now to the world I'd found in the darkness of solitary, and I was going back to the girl I had found there in the valley. It wasn't a real world. It stayed quietly waiting in my mind and that was why I liked it.

They would find me sitting here staring the same way they had found me then. They would see that my body breathed, but my eyes would show that I was not one of them.

And this time they would not be able to bring me back. I knew that, as my eyes followed the moonlight and fixed on the night sky..

*I came back to my valley in the music and the moonlight and she waited for me. She was pale and lovely and her eyes searched my face.*

*And then she smiled.*

*I had come to stay.*

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